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THEATER PRODUCTION AS A CURRICULUM ACTIVITY

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In contrast to the perplexity and confusion usually attendant upon the production of the high-school play was the method involved in a recent production of *The Tempest* by the high school of Berkeley, California. Here Shakespeare was treated in his full significance as a writer of plays for the theater, a conception heretofore not realized, in his teaching at least, by the average high-school instructor. Such conception carries with it a new responsibility. When Shakespeare or any other dramatist is discussed and studied in terms of the theater, it becomes necessary not only to present to the student certain fundamental characteristics of the theater, but to make such definition clear by practical demonstration.

The faculty of the Berkeley High School have in recent years approached the subject of stage production somewhat in the spirit of the stage artist. Using Shakespeare as their medium, they have brought home to the student in very clear and certain terms the fact that, in its more complete sense, stage production is a matter of ensemble harmony, that no one element can be dissociated or stressed apart from the whole production. To the practical stage-worker, this theory of theater production seems clear enough, and any competent director instinctively strives toward consistent co-ordination. It is another thing, however, for the amateur to share the same view, and it is indeed an encouraging indication of the importance which in these later days attaches to the theater that our school authorities should endeavor to inculcate in the mind of the student the same professional conception of a given art as that which is conceived and achieved by the professional artist himself. In a word, the Berkeley High School production of *The Tempest* was this year made a curriculum activity. From every possible angle, the work of the student

on behalf of the spring play was dignified by such activity being made a part of his school work. He has experienced the double joy of receiving credit for the thing he liked to do.

Early in the first term it was announced that the spring play would be Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. At the outset a division of labor was made among the classes in English, fine art, domestic art, science, music, and physical education, and general direction of the undertaking assigned to Mr. D. Winter, of the department of English. From a general tryout open to the entire school an interpretation class was derived. Students in this class were permitted to adopt this work in lieu of their regular English course and received the same values in credit as that which they would receive in other English courses involving similar labor and application. The class was large enough to afford two complete and separate casts for the play—a fact which in turn made it possible for the director to adopt a system of principal and understudy. Later this developed into a double cast system, whereby one cast played the first performance, and the other cast the second performance.

While the interpretation class was being organized and receiving its preliminary instructions, a stagecraft class was organized within the art department under the supervision of Miss Laura Marshall. Its first meeting was with the director of the production. At that time he told the story of the play, outlining the general plan of the stage, the placement of the characters, and of course the spirit which was to dominate the production. He placed emphasis on the phantasmic quality of *The Tempest*, and at the outset impressed upon the student the necessity of having the scene harmonize with the interpretation. The class was advised to conform both to the limitations of the stage and to the requirements of the staging. They were told that Caliban's cave was not to be too close to Prospero's cave, that the sky was to be dull and stormy, that on this barren island where the action took place there was no shelter except that afforded by the tall trees. Ariel was to enter from a height in the rear from where he would descend on rocky steps to the stage. Caliban probably would exit on his knees and Prospero and Miranda would be seen playing chess: the caves,

therefore, could be low. With these few instructions the class went to work.

As a first step, each student read the play for himself. Not content with this background and that provided by the director of the production, Miss Marshall gave a talk on the subject of modern stage decoration, referring the class to copies of the *Theatre Arts Magazine*, numerous photographs and prints furnished her by Samuel J. Hume, of the Greek Theatre, University of California, who for some years has been intimately in touch with the progressive work of Berkeley High School, and the writings of Shelden Cheney, who, like Mr. Hume, was once a student in the school, and later influenced its art activity. *The Tempest* illustrations of Dulac were called upon to impress the student with the significance of color and of the presence of a spirit of unreality so dominant in the play. Miss Marshall then conducted her class to the stage and at once cautioned them to defeat in their preliminary design the insuperable difficulties of a concrete, circumscribed high-school auditorium stage with its projecting buttresses, its massive and impenetrable walls, its inaccessible switchboard, and all the other off-stage horrors which make the high-school stage a wilderness of barren hope. Sight lines were drawn from both sides of the auditorium and the designer was enjoined to plan nothing significant beyond the reasonable line of vision. The qualification of reason was necessary because of the flanking embrace of a too generous auditorium. A stepladder even was called into play and upon this topmost height Ariel was asked to determine how much of the balcony he could not see.

Various exercises were then undertaken. The student made a color reproduction of his idea of the stage setting. He then made a scale drawing of the scene, first having himself measured the actual stage distances which would be involved in his design. The first difficulty arose over the matter of trees: should they be naturalistic or conventional? The answer was derived from a study of trees—from a pile of prints and photographs of all types and kinds of trees the student derived inspiration and after due reflection adapted for his purpose the conventional tree rather than the realistic tree. All drawings and color schemes were submitted for inspection. They varied and a great many were

unimaginative, yet some betrayed stimulation. Class criticism at once was concerned with the matter of design and composition, fitness of the color scheme to the purpose of the play, and the possibilities of reproduction. Three designs were chosen and the winners were made captains of three groups of workers, each group being instructed to construct a scene model from the artist's design. A combination of youthful enthusiasm, intelligent direction, and a generous amount of pasteboard, tempora, and gum muslin produced three models. These three models were adjudged by a faculty committee and a committee from the class, and the two judgments given separately favored the work of Edward Jabes, a lad of seventeen years. The class after this selection was made worked out, in the large, the scheme presented in the model, and with such facilities as were at hand and a budget altogether too small, achieved a stage setting of beauty and distinction.

The three models were not without interest. Chiefly they indicated, in one case, a more or less conventional adaptation of realistic staging, and in the other, a departure from a false standard and a quite conscious effort toward decoration. Beyond that they showed definite compliance with Professor Winter's original instructions. It is hardly necessary to say that the efforts of the stagecraft class stimulated interest among students not directly concerned with the production of the spring play, and more than any other factor helped to convey the idea that the production had been undertaken in a serious and dignified spirit, and that it was worthy of more consideration than usually attaches to what too often is merely an amateur effort.

As a matter of fact, the entire school during the final stages of the production was keenly alive to what was going on. Elaborate and decorative costumes were being made by the students in the department of domestic arts, and the electrical and mechanical features of the performance were in a process of construction by students in the department of science. Perhaps the most striking feature from the purely creative standpoint was the contribution of the music department. The high school boasts of a symphony orchestra of some fifty pieces. Two student members of this orchestra composed and orchestrated complete incidental music

for the production. The full significance of this achievement can best be appreciated when we consider the standard of popular music against which the growing mind of the high-school youth must contend.

The final performance of course was in every sense a conspicuous and remarkable achievement, full of dignity, distinction, and spirit. Shakespeare's verse was read with incredible intelligence, and throughout the entire production a spirit of close co-ordination was manifest. It is not the purpose of this article, however, to comment upon the actual performance; the writer is concerned more with the exercise value involved in the work of preparing the play for public presentation. Professor Winter and Miss Marshall and their co-workers brought home to the student the fact that a Shakespearean production can rightfully command his maximum effort. The enterprise afforded him a better basis for critical appreciation of the work now being done in the theater with which as he grows older he will come in contact, either as a contributing artist or as an understanding observer. It will in future likewise place him in conflict at once with any kind of theater expression which lacks sincerity, conviction, and design.

Moreover it has aided him to a keener appreciation of his privileges as a student, and has brought him into an expressional activity systematically co-ordinated with his general high-school education. The feeling behind this whole enterprise is well expressed by Miss Fanny W. McLean, head of the department of English and vice-principal of the Berkeley High School, who in many ways is the guiding spirit behind this phase of the school's activity. She says:

It is the best example of motivated work that we have in the high school. It brings in more departments than any other activity that we have developed. A great part of the work done was a recognized part of the curriculum and this gave it a professional character which it would not have had were it made merely a student activity. It permitted of daily concentration, coming at a regular time. It rightly therefore has primary importance rather than secondary importance, which all ordinary activity always must have. The students for the most part have played at their task and have felt that their contribution after all was a tribute to genius—in this instance the genius of Shakespeare.

An attitude of this kind upon the part of the high-school authorities will raise art study in the high school to a new and proper elevation. Its educational value lies in the fact that it opens up to the student potentially, if not immediately, a greater degree of life-appreciation. The experience enjoyed by the student engaged in such production work, and the influence afforded other students who normally would be uninterested, will indeed have a salutary effect, coming as it does during the early stages of development, upon their powers of observation and judgment not only of things but of people.